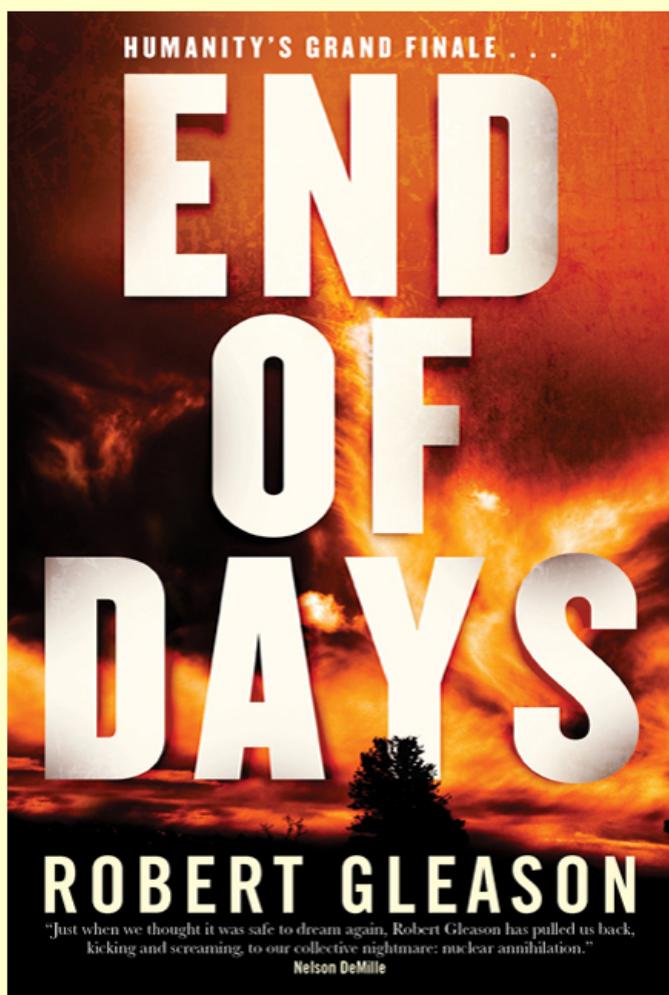


**READ IT FIRST**



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END OF DAYS

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# 1 They Won't Know It Was Missing . . .

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*“Yo, Katy, how’s it hanging? Thought I’d send you a memento mori, just to let you know I’m thinking of you.”*

Stone was on her phone screen, smiling and waving at the camera.

Kate Magruder hit “pause”—freezing his grin on the screen. It was hard to believe that three years ago they’d been lovers, partners—a team.

She sighed. It seemed a million years ago.

In another hour Stacy would make Kate up, and she would be on TV—her special news report from Mecca. In the portable makeup mirror on her folding camp table, she studied her face with professional detachment. At age thirty-six, she had her mother’s mouth and high Apache cheekbones, framing her father’s emerald eyes. Her reddish blond hair she wore straight down her back, and her figure—still athletic from decades of running, weight workouts, and Tae Kwon Do—drew more than its share of wolf whistles.

But she took no pride in her appearance. She’d always viewed good looks—hers, anyone’s—as physical fraudulence, a diversion from the person within.

*“Whoever the hell that is,”* she grumbled to the mirror.

Maybe that was what she’d seen in John Stone. He put no one on pedestals. His nickname for her had been Beauty—which he’d always intoned with a sneer—and he’d goaded her continually about her now-famous face.

*“Your looks may stop some men’s clocks, but not mine. Around here we work for a living. Get the picture, Spoiled Rich Girl? Pick up those mikes and cameras. Get the lead out. We have a shoot and a story to cover.”*

And stories they had covered—every war, famine, earthquake, and plague planet Earth had to offer—for four long years. She’d been his camera operator and sound woman, then rewrote his copy, then coauthored the news stories.

He’d been a bastard—but without bullshit. And he’d seen her for what she was—a consummate pro, not just a pretty face.

For that she had loved him.

She still loved him.

*Oh, John, where are you now?*

*Where did it all go wrong?*

Not that he was hard to look at. She wished he’d gotten his nose fixed after she’d dragged him bleeding out of a biker bar in East L.A. As usual, he needed a haircut. She also wished he’d get a new wardrobe. Bush jackets and fatigues were hardly her idea of haute couture. Lean, rangy, she guessed he was still fit. Maybe as fit as when he’d won fourteen straight for the Yankees his rookie year

and taken them to the Series. Ordinarily, she would have muttered an obscenity about his conceited smirk, except the grin now bothered her in a way she couldn't explain to herself.

Something about the eyes.

Kate sat down on her cot. She couldn't sleep. Even when she wasn't playing the video of John Stone, it was playing in her mind. *Memento mori. Remember that you shall die.* It was just like Stone to send her a message wrapped in a riddle. Stone was afraid of nothing, but there was something in his voice.

Wind attacked her tent, and she peeked out the flap as the bloody dawn rose over the city. Mecca sprawled like a wrinkled old woman in a wadi, a dry riverbed carved between steep hills. The muezzins' morning call to prayer from the minarets towering over the city's mosques sang to her on the stinging wind. Their song, for Kate, summoned the ghosts of Islamic holy warriors past, a wail for the Mahdi-Messiah to redeem the True Believers and restore Dar-al-Islam—"the Domain of Islam"—to its rightful place on Mohammed's earth and in Allah's paradise, to punish the wicked and reward the righteous.

Answering the call of the criers, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims came out of the tents that surrounded the city and prostrated themselves in the direction of the black draped Ka'ba, the House of Abraham in the heart of the city. Kate knew that many of the Muslims on earth, more than a billion people, were at this moment facing in her direction as they answered the call of the muezzins to embrace Mecca and praise Allah. She ducked back inside the tent, reminding herself that she was one of the infidels.

They were here to cover the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mohammed's birthplace that attracted millions of Muslims each year. Vladimir Malokov, Russia's minister of defense, had been her ostensible reason for coming to Mecca. He had converted to Islam, was in Mecca for his hajj, and despite her mother's wishes, the Saudi government—sensing in his pilgrimage a PR bonanza—had granted Kate and MTN exclusive coverage of the event. But her real reason was the concern raised by Stone's video. Stone claimed he was unearthing "the scoop of the century."

She flopped back down on the army cot and picked up the phone. Stone was one of the few people who mattered to her. He was the best reporter the gods ever created. Stone and Kate had been through some hairy stuff together. Genocide in Africa and the Balkans. Invading a Cuban gulag to search for a gun-toting nun.

"*You're a man to ride the river with,*" Stone told her in an exaggerated Texas drawl after she'd covered his back in that biker bar after he pissed off guys who thought MAC-10s and rattlesnake tattoos were fashion statements.

Kate backed up the video and hit "play" again. Stone's curly black hair and raptor's grin reappeared on the phone's small screen.

*"You thought your mom and I were a few bricks shy on the subject of nuclear proliferation. Well, after my last foray into the Land of Loose Nukes I couldn't resist proving you wrong. Catch a glimpse of the Russian nuclear storage facility behind me."*

Behind Stone was a paint-blistered storage building. Untended, unguarded.

*“As you can see from the rickety fence, the absence of guards—or any personnel at all, in spite of the fact that this shed is a high-security installation warehousing several tons of bomb-grade nuclear fuel—we can walk right in now and help ourselves to any of the containers, then waltz out the way we came. How can we be so sure? you ask. Because we did just that.”*

The camera moved in tight on two small slate-gray steel drums.

*“One of the drums is filled with bomb-grade plutonium, the other enriched bomb-grade uranium. Each weighs around fifty pounds—containing enough for an Hiroshima and a Nagasaki bomb blast. Easy for me to carry out.”*

The camera panned to the fence and the side of the building.

*“How can this be happening? The Russian economy is in chaos. The guards and workers are gone because they haven’t been paid in months. They’re out hustling for food, heating oil, medicine, and gasoline—anything to make ends meet.*

*“Not that anybody would want to hang around these installations even if they were well-paid. There is no money for upkeep or even safety inspections. Consequently, these installations are death traps.”*

The camera panned the interior of Stone’s nearby hotel room. In the middle of the room sat his drum of nuclear materials.

*“Well, Katy, I know what you’re wondering now. How is that maniac going to get that stuff out of the drum? No prob-lem-o. As long as I don’t ingest the shit, it’s perfectly safe. So first I open this drum with my trusty hacksaw.”*

The camera closed in on Stone’s trusty hacksaw.

*“Then I can scoop it up with my bare hands and shove it into the cargo pockets of my shirt and fatigue pants. Because . . . alpha rays don’t pass through skin!*

*“By the way, I can squeeze enough into my pockets for a couple of bombs. You don’t need boxcars full of this stuff to build a good fissile bomb. A piece of high-grade nuclear fuel the size of your fist is all you’d need.*

*“Getting it through airports, seaports, and border checkpoints, you ask? Ha! Russia has no money for detection devices.*

*“Now you’re thinking: ‘Okay, asshole. You were foolish enough to swipe some stuff from an unguarded installation. What are you going to do with it? You need nuclear weapons scientists to turn that stuff into a bomb.’*

*“Wrong again, Katy dear.”*

The video cut to a photo of an old Civil War cannon.

*“All I have to do is sneak up some dark night on one of the innumerable Civil War cannons, and with an acetylene torch cut off a hunk of cannon six feet long.*

*“Or I can just buy a hunk from an ordnance plant—the easier course.*

*“In any event, I weld one end shut, load it with a piece of the enriched uranium we just stole, then pack the other end with more dynamite or gunpowder—and wham! We blast our uranium bullet into the uranium at the cannon barrel’s far end. Guess what we have? The Hiroshima ‘gun-barrel bomb.’ The genius of this baby is that it’s foolproof. Any moron can make it work. The guys at the American Manhattan Project—not to be confused with that gaggle of State Department morons who ran our ‘Pakistani Manhattan Project’—were so confident of the old gun-barrel design they never tested it. Well, actually they did, if you want to be technical. The test site was Hiroshima.*

*“Now if you want to do some real testing, it really isn’t all that hard. Get a ball of plutonium, encase it in a spherical steel jacket lined with C-4, crimp fifty or sixty blasting caps around it—all uniformly placed—wire them up to a single electrical source, and throw the switch. You may want to test it a couple of times with a conventional explosive, but it will work. Trust me. It worked at Nagasaki.*

*“And no, this isn’t the only nuclear shit exiting Mother Russia. ‘Mad Vlad’ Malokov reports a dozen Kilo-Class subs, over one hundred suitcase nukes, and a sizable assortment of cruise missiles are currently on their misplaced list. In other words, these weapons have gone over the hill.*

*“Time to go. Don’t worry. I’m going to return this stuff to the place I stole it from. Otherwise they won’t know it was missing. I’ll leave it on the front porch. No one knows what these storage sites contain. There’s no bookkeeping.*

*“So you can see, Katy dear, the shit’s so easy to obtain you have to assume that noisy neighbor of yours is now a nuclear player. I know you’ve sometimes been skeptical of your mom and me, but the Global Arms Race from Hell is on.”*

Kate turned off the video and sighed.

She’d seen something she’d never expected to see.

John Stone was scared.

Maybe it had to do with Vlad. Many people thought he was extremely dangerous. He wasn’t called “Mad Vlad” for nothing. He’d also earned the name Vlad the Impaler during the Chechnya War when he’d staked dead prisoners on posts lining the main street into Grozny.

There were rumors he’d had the men impaled alive.

He was wealthy beyond dreams of avarice, and so far the ineffective Russian bureaucracy had been unable to remove him from office.

If Vlad was in Mecca, Stone wouldn't be far away.

She got up, donned her pilgrim's robes and veil.

*What are you trying to tell me, John?*

She already knew about Russia's nuclear yard sale. Her mother's media empire was now dedicated to warning the world about nuclear Armageddon, which had earned her considerable ridicule, including the nickname "the Nuclear Noah," particularly after she built her Fortress-bomb shelter she called "the Citadel" in the middle of Arizona's Sonoran Desert.

When Stone came to share her dementia, her mother—known to her friends as L. L.—had shipped him off to the ends of the world. In Russia, China, and the Middle East in particular, L. L. and Stone had chased every rumor of Planet Earth's imminent demise.

Kate didn't believe any of their paranoia, but still the video bothered her.

There was also the letter she'd received from Stone the week before—from an area in Central Asia so remote the envelope had four different postmarks. His letter sounded a little crazy, haunted, and, she believed now, scared. She'd perused his letter a hundred times.

It read like a last will and testament for the human race.

Kate shut her eyes. Arab music began as the haunting voices of the muezzins faded. She had thought music was illegal during Ramadan.

Personally, she would have been happy to outlaw it the year around. She hated desert music with its endlessly repeating, jarringly discordant refrains.

*Memento mori*, Stone said to her. Remember that you shall die. In the Middle Ages people wore a skull on a necklace and periodically looked at it to remind themselves that death was waiting.

*But whose death was Stone talking about?*

## 2 The Woman Who Rode the Wind

---

At age eighty-one, Lydia Lozen Magruder still possessed the gift of fear, and like *Macbeth's* witches, she had glimpsed darkness.

But she had also seen the Light.

Standing at her sacred spot, Three Points—at the mountain summit of Espinazo Sangre de Cristo, high above the Sonoran Desert—she'd seen that Light ten long years ago. It was an experience she never wanted to repeat.

She had once died up there. With her heart stopped, she had lain a full fourteen minutes out of this life in that cliff-top cave—or so her shaman, mentor, and spirit guide, Bear Claw, had told her.

*... During that near-death experience, the crimson canyons of Three Points were hammered by lightning, rain, and hailstorms with winds up to 140 miles per*

hour. But worse than the storms was her vision—rockets launching, bombs detonating, fireballs and mushroom clouds swelling, firestorms merging, converging, consuming entire cities, coastlines, highways clogged with survivors clutching babies, children, each other. A vision of the End Time in horrific detail.

*But that wasn't the worst of her visions.*

*She had been them—everyone and everything. She not only felt the agony of the burn victims, she felt the ferocity of the weapons—the missiles, the submarines, the bombers, the bombs. She rose upward with them on their furious flights. She communed with them even as they exploded. She sang and laughed with them to their flash, the vastness of their fire.*

*Worse—like the Weird Sisters in Macbeth—the weapons spoke to her.*

*Telling her “their secret.”*

*Only once did she make the mistake of describing to someone her vision up on Three Points and revealing that secret. Kate—“sharper than a serpent’s tooth”—had told her she was “saving that story for your sanity hearing.”*

*“Don’t you dare tell anyone about what happened at Three Points,” Kate had said. “Whatever credibility you’ve built up will be gone in a heartbeat. People will be signing petitions to have you committed. And mine will be the first signature.”*

*For once in her life, L. L. recognized that there was wisdom in Kate’s warning. She never spoke of Three Points again . . .*

L. L. stared out over the desert. It was hard to believe she’d “died” up there. She knew she was old but didn’t think of herself as *that* old.

True, her hair showed more white than gunmetal-gray, but her back was still straight. Her dark eyes and slanted cheekbones were etched at the corners with crow’s-feet, but when those eyes narrowed, her jaw set and cheekbones flared, hers was a face cast hard as concrete, with a stare like a Damascus blade. At the age of eighty-one she was still riding her Appaloosa, Nightmare, high up into the San Carlos Mountains alone.

She had a reputation for toughness, and over the years she’d had to be tough. Lydia Lozen Magruder owned and ran not only the most powerful media conglomerate on earth, she ruled the heavens as well—where her satellites cut a commanding swath.

L. L. knew the score. All of the strategists from Herman Kahn on down had agreed that the old Cold War nuclear strategies had been a charade. Oh, sure, the nuclear weapons had been real. But neither Russian or the U.S. had the will to launch them. That would have meant total annihilation for both sides. The only realistic nuclear scenarios were set in the future, when many nations would have access to nuclear arms and strikes could be anonymous or disguised.

That future was *now*.

L. L. knew it was just a matter of time before one of the rogue states or terrorist organizations anonymously nuked a couple of American cities—then

sat back and watched the feathers fly. She'd asked Defense Secretary Jack Taylor what his and the president's response would be.

"We'd have no choice. If they have one, you have to assume they have more. Nuclear destruction is the most unbearable fate in human history. The terror and agony and—let's face it—our lust for revenge would be too overpowering."

"So what would you do?"

"Go to our enemies and demand they produce the guilty party—or we nuke them all. Off the face of the earth."

"And if they don't produce the culprit? We kill them all."

"We nuke 'em till they glow."

"What if that only creates more nuclear enemies?"

"What choice would we have?"

She feared that for one of the few times in his life, Taylor had it right . . .

*. . . Then why was there so much apathy? She would have thought that the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon's northwest wing followed by the Iraqi and Afghan wars would have been a wake-up call. She had watched those events, sick to her soul. But those catastrophes hadn't even dented the public's ultimate indifference. There was no debate over nuclear terrorism, its sponsoring states, or finally ending nuclear proliferation. Public discussion of nuclear terrorism remained taboo, and the nation eventually returned its head to sand.*

*It was actually worse than heads in the sand. The way the President Haines administration now courted that oil-rich Mideast dictatorship, Dar-al-Suhl, almost made her physically ill. Haines seemed to positively dote on its leaders, that bastard Haddad and his two twin sisters. They made her flesh crawl . . .*

. . . All of which only made her more desperate to hear from John Stone. She'd read the first e-mail and didn't know what to compare Stone's story with. It was the most frightening material she'd ever encountered.

L. L. would have had to go back 14,000 years to find anything remotely similar. Perhaps Pleistocene man's global extermination of earth's megafauna—70 percent of the large mammals in North and South America alone. Perhaps those specieswide exterminations of the mammoths, saber-toothed cats, the giant beaver, and the short-face bear—just to name a few—would have compared with Stone's report.

Stone was describing an inevitable war not only on earth's species but ultimately on evolution itself.

The old woman sighed wearily. Born to the desert, she was intimately acquainted with the struggle to survive. She knew the desert as a proving ground for nature's toughest survivors, for tarantulas and horned toads, scorpions and diamondbacks, kangaroo rats and gila monsters, vultures and a very few people.

All the famous nuclear testing sites—White Sands, Los Alamos, Yucca flats—were located in the desert. Deserts could endure the effects of nuclear

war, better than any other terrain on earth—fire, blast, fallout, plague, even nuclear winter.

Which was why L. L. had constructed the Citadel—her own private Shangri-la for the Third Millennium—in the desert. A fortress of knowledge, culture, and civilization, it was built on that darkling plain to withstand anything—the Armies of the Night *and* the End of Time.

But it was also part and parcel of the mountains around her—particularly Espinazo Sangre de Cristo. In her mind the dozens of miles of tunnels and caverns within that mountain were as much a part of the Citadel as her personal fortress-redoubt and its surrounding community. In some respects the chambered mountain—packed to the rafters with supplies and materiel, arms and ammunition—was more the Citadel than the Citadel. To L. L. those shafts and caverns—replete with everything necessary to one day rebuild civilization—were the Citadel's organs and circulatory system.

*Her organs and circulatory system.*

The phone in her pocket vibrated with an incoming call, and she answered it.

“This is Bill Nance at the Houston Command Center,” a male voice said. The Command Center was the central coordination point for her worldwide—and celestial—network of microwave stations and satellites that provided radio, telephone, and television service for much of the world. The building Nance was sitting in was 1,100 miles from the Citadel, but it was part of the mystery and magic of electronics that the closest point between was a signal bounced off a satellite orbiting the earth.

“There has been no communication from John Stone,” Nance told her.

“Have you notified all our offices and affiliates to be on the alert for him?”

“Yes, ma'am. The last sighting of him was in Cairo. He was there interviewing their minister of defense. He was researching their weapons programs. The, uh, Egyptian police are looking for him.”

Lydia's thin lips shaped a wry smile. “Then he's probably drunk in some Nile brothel, you ask me.”

---

Bill Nance didn't want to ask her anything. He was so nervous he was now starting to sweat. He'd switched the hand holding the phone to wipe his palm. Low man on the totem pole, he had drawn the black marble. That's what employees at the center called giving bad news to Lydia Lozen. She was respected by all, but when she was pissed her eruptions rivaled Krakatoa. In those moments, she was typically described as “a nut-buster.”

Still her bursts of generosity were legendary. CNN had run a story that morning about the private jet L. L. had chartered to fly the seven-year-old son of her Rangoon stations chief to the Mayo Clinic for critical blood work.

Nance—like everyone at MTN—was fascinated by L. L. If he hadn't been the bad news bearer, he'd have relished talking to the fabled Lady in Black,

especially about John Stone. He'd been one of the great Yankee pitchers until he climbed over the dugout one night to break up a brawl among two rival street gangs. He'd hospitalized three of them, and the lawsuit against the Yankees was televised worldwide.

When asked to leave baseball permanently by the commissioner, Stone's sole comment to the media was:

"I always wanted to write. I guess it's time."

Write he did. Two Pulitzers later and the star investigative reporter for L. L.'s communications network, he had once been described as a hybrid of James Joyce and Genghis Khan.

Nance had never seen Lydia in person, but her broadcast image was familiar. She was invariably clad in black. Old-time employees claimed she went into mourning on the day the United States privatized its nuclear bomb-fuel processing agency.

"That agency," L. L. frequently said, "had been the planet's last best hope, the only operation capable of buying up Russia's loose nukes and saving the world from unbridled nuclear proliferation. No private company in the history of the world could clean up that mess over there, and now it will never be done."

In later years, quoting the inestimable Russell Seitz, she took to referring to Russia's nuclear supermarket as "the yard sale at the end of history" and railed endlessly, both in public and in private, about those incessant reports coming out of Russia about "missing cruise missiles, vanished subs, disappearing suitcase nukes."

L. L. was the favorite topic of conversation at the Houston Center. Tabloids ran stories about her wandering the desert like a demented prospector, talking to rocks and snakes. Some people said she read minds and sent messages on the wind. The fortress/bomb shelter she'd built in that desert mountain was rumored to house everything from Michelangelo's *David* to an intact UFO. A guy in the next office claimed he'd heard from a reliable source that she'd paid the Louvre a billion dollars for the *Mona Lisa* and what was hanging in the museum now was a computerized reproduction.

Nance wasn't a guy with a lot of imagination. He sometimes felt if it couldn't be read off a computer screen, hell, it wasn't true, didn't exist at all—or didn't *deserve* to exist. And he never voiced any opinions at coffee breaks anyway, not even when the *National Scandal* ran a six-part exposé revealing that L. L. was the product of the abduction/rape of an Indian medicine woman by a space alien. He didn't have enough time in grade to give an opinion about the boss woman.

Besides, he liked his nuts right where they were.

---

"Where's my daughter?"

Nance flinched. He cleared his throat and mumbled: "I'll check, ma'am."

He punched “Kate Magruder” into his terminal.  
“She’s already in Mecca.”

Lydia broke the connection and slammed the palm-sized phone against her hip.

She had not wanted Kate to do a broadcast from Mecca.

But she knew better than to forbid Kate anything. She shared Kate’s willfulness. Even as a girl, Kate had been wild and elusive—more like L. L. than anyone alive. But together they were often oil and water.

If Lydia made the mistake of treading too heavily, Kate drew her sword. Then she would head off to Mecca or some other godforsaken place. Kate had even once gone into a Cuban prison with John Stone to rescue the evangelical rock star Sister Cassandra. That story had a happy ending. Sister Cassandra, like L. L., shared *Indian* blood, and the two became fast friends. Cassie was now the world’s most lucrative entertainer, with a global following.

There was a time when L. L. might have called Frank, her stepson, and asked *him* to talk some sense into her daughter’s head. They were not related by blood; Lydia sometimes wished Frank and Kate had married. Frank was a medical doctor and research scientist with degrees from Harvard and Johns Hopkins. His sophistication and intelligence, if not his temper, matched that of L. L.’s daughter.

Lydia walked out to the cliff’s edge. She stared out over the desert and sighed with weariness and dismay. She had a terrible sense of foreboding.

A fear John Stone had confirmed.

He had traveled the world undercover for three years and had unearthed a horror story, not just a scoop. Stone said he’d learned of a plot to set the Western world back a thousand years to the Dark Ages.

L. L. had never proved him wrong.

He gave her only half the story in the file he e-mailed. He was supposed to conclude his investigation and send her the second file a week ago. Not that a week meant much to a man whose blood ran 90 proof at times and who could spend a week in a Bangkok whorehouse or guzzle vodka with Mad Vlad Malokov in his Black Sea dacha.

A mile-long sandstorm festooned with four soaring dust devils was blowing across the desert floor. As L. L. stared at the sand, in her mind’s eye she saw a band of Apaches riding, their ponies kicking up the storm.

At the forefront of the band, she visualized her grandmother, Lozen, the female war shaman of the Apache Nation, who had counseled Mangas Coloradas, Cochise, and Victorio.

Riding the wind.

Lozen, who had predicted the holocaust that doomed the Apache Nation.

Lozen looked up from the desert floor at Lydia, and Lydia felt the message like a bolt of lightning. *The heart of the world is throbbing in your hand.* L. L.’s hand burned as if a hot coal had seared it.

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